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Making Better Global Guesses

By Arthur M. Cox

THE RECENT HEARINGS of the House Select Committee on Intelligence revealing the failure of U.S. intelligence estimates for the Tet offensive in Vietnam, the Cyprus events, the 1973 Yom Kippur war in the Middle East and the 1974 coup in Portugal have raised serious questions about the many billions of dollars the American taxpayer spends each year for intelligence. Committee Chairman Otis G. Pike (D-N.Y.) has said: "No way we are getting our money's worth out of it." There can be little doubt that U.S. intelligence estimating is not as good as it should be, and that there are ways to make it better.

Sherman Kent, who served for more than 20 years as chairman of CIA's Board of National Estimates, has called the intelligence estimator a "speculative evaluator." The estimator is not a collector, collator or researcher. His job is to look at the available data about a particular problem and make an educated guess about what is going to happen. In Kent's words, such informed guessing, "subject to error as it has to be, is far preferable to the alternative — the crystal ball." It is important, though, to be fully aware that intelligence estimating is not a science; it does involve speculation which can result sometimes in serious mistakes.

The possibility for error increases as the estimate moves from such tangible subjects as crop forecasts, levels of industrial production, order of battle or numbers of missile silos to the emotions and the minds of human beings — the intentions of political leaders. Politics and human behavior — especially the intentions of individual leaders — have always been the most unpredictable. Thus, even the best informed and most experienced political observers are vulnerable to making occasional large goofs.

Even when most of the data is hard, as in crop forecasting, mistakes can be made. Our high flying space cameras could observe precisely all of the Soviet wheat fields and the daily weather over those fields, but we seriously misestimated the size of the latest Soviet wheat crop. In the arena of human affairs, of course, the margin for error is much greater.

THE RECENT report of the Commission on the Organization of the Government for the Conduct of Foreign Policy concluded that "national intelligence estimates appear to have little impact on policy makers today, in large part because key consumers prefer to base their own estimates of future developments on competing sources of information and analysis." If this is an accurate finding, it indicates the sorry state of current U.S. intelligence estimating. In the past, there weren't supposed to be any competing sources of information and analysis. The estimators were supposed to have access to all pertinent information available to the U.S. government, whether it came from the press, the universities and other open sources or from the most highly classified documents.

One of the difficulties has been that Henry Kissinger has conducted U.S. foreign policy in a most secretive manner. Often Kissinger does not share crucial information with the intelligence estimators. During the very sensitive "back channel" negotiations for SALT I, conducted between Kissinger and Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin, President Nixon was often the only other American to be fully informed. The opening to China, the Vietnam agreement and much of the Middle East diplomacy has been conducted in a similar fashion.

Another difficulty is that intelligence estimates are limited to information from abroad while foreign and defense policy is inextricably linked with U.S. domestic politics.

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decisions based on unwarranted optimism. For example, just before President Johnson ordered the massive intervention of U.S. troops in 1965, the intelligence estimate warned:

"We will find ourselves mired down in combat in the jungle in a military effort that we cannot win and from which we will have extreme difficulty extracting ourselves." That rejected estimate could have saved many thousands of lives and over $150 billion for the American taxpayer.

IN KENT'S VIEW, it is important that intelligence estimating not become involved in recommending policy, and that the estimating machinery should be organizationally independent from the policy makers and operators. "Intelligence," he said, "should be close to policy, plans and operations for guidance, but not so close that it loses objectivity and integrity of judgment." If an estimator has a personal stake in the outcome of a particular policy or operation his impartiality is lost.

Almost from the outset in 1947 the director of central intelligence, in addition to his estimating and coordinating functions, has been responsible for covert operations. A man who has made a personal commitment to the success of a particular operation is not likely to be a dispassionate estimator of the realities. The consequences of having the CIA director responsible for both covert operations and estimates can be seen in the Bay of Pigs disaster.

If the CIA chief is assigned to handle the clandestine overthrow of a foreign